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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANILA 001350

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EAP/MTS

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SUBJECT: PHILIPPINES REACTS TO IRANIAN ELECTION VIOLENCE

REF: MANILA 1262

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Allegations of electoral fraud and violent suppression of public protest in Iran have sparked widespread condemnation among Philippine government officials, media, and the general public. Beyond concern for the fate of pro-democracy activists as well as approximately 8,000 Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and permanent residents who live and work in Iran, the violent events over a perceived fraudulent election resonate with Filipinos' concerns about the possible outcome of planned May 2010 national elections. In Senate hearings and in the Ambassador's private discourse with election officials, the business sector, and others, there exists a sense that any serious irregularities in the Philippine elections next May could pose a setback for the nation's continued consolidation of democratic institutions. National media have devoted significant coverage to Iranian elections and subsequent civil unrest; some editorialists have cited parallels with Philippine history. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) During a Senate hearing about the planned automation of Philippine elections, Philippine Senator Richard Gordon warned that equipment problems could have dire consequences, opening opportunities for fraud and even the outright failure of the elections. In a clear reference to violent civil disturbances now unfolding in Iran, Gordon reflected that "We don't want to be another Iran." In a June 24 conversation with the Ambassador, a Philippine Commission on Elections (COMELEC) member echoed Gordon's concerns. The Ambassador encountered similar sentiments at a recent meeting of the Anvil Business Club at which she delivered keynote remarks. In a June 25 conversation with emboff, COMELEC Commissioner Rene Sarmiento opined that the protests in Iran were "food for thought" for the Philippines. Sarmiento said that the Philippines should be "careful" in the execution of forthcoming 2010 elections because "anything can happen" when election results are not trusted. The episode in Tehran, he noted, could hold lessons for the Philippines.

13. (C) The Iranian elections and subsequent violence have elicited substantial attention in Philippine media, in large part because controversy over Philippine national elections slated for May 2010 already colors virtually all political discourse in Manila. The House of Representatives recently passed a resolution calling for a constituent assembly to amend the Constitution prior to 2010 elections (reftel); many political observers fear that the House's actions represent a move by Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to remain in power past the end of her present term -- notwithstanding her repeated assurances that elections will take place as scheduled, and that she will step down. The Philippine media also follow Middle East developments due to the large number of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) who live and work there; Iran is home to some 8,000 Filipino OFWs and permanent residents.

14. (C) Writing in the leading-daily Philippine Daily Inquirer, columnist Rina Jimenez-David decried Filipinos' apparent "protest fatigue" that resulted in only a modest turnout at a June 10 rally convened to highlight public indignation with the Arroyo administration and proposed constitutional reform. Jimenez-David drew parallels between reported irregularities in Iranian elections and scandals surrounding the 2004 Philippine presidential election, which some feel tainted the legitimacy of Arroyo's victory. Leading editorials June 24 and June 25 in both the Philippine Daily Inquirer and Philippine Star, respectively, featured scathing criticism of the Iranian government's violent crackdown on opposition activists, and likewise alluded to Philippine history, with the Inquirer observing that "there is something all too familiar about the situation in Iran."

KENNEY